The songs and music of the 30's and 40's in the Indian film

Raja Ahmad Alauddin
and Prajna Prasad

The film song is a fact of life in contemporary India. In its acceptability and popularity, it has transcended all such barriers as obtain between the classes and the masses on the one hand and between one linguistic and cultural region and another. Places of warship and public platform alike patronise the film song, at weddings and on festive occasions, the film songs take pride of place, media of mass communication like radio and TV seek popularity through film songs. It has bridged the gulf between classical and folk music. Whereas classical music of the Hindustani and Carnatic schools present itself in two different modes even today, the film song has a common form in the North and in the South of India (Pt. Narendra Sharma, 1980:56).

Vanraj Bhatia, who was in the faculty of music, University of Delhi in his writing about film music for a film Seminar in 1961 observed.

"More persistently noticeable than the proverbial Indian fly or even poverty, is Indian film music. Neither the village nor the seclusion of the urban rich quarter provide any escape... The great surge of this musical wave has penetrated all spheres, sparing no corner of the country. Truly, film music has become more important than the films themselves."

Vanraj brought to his analytical assessment of Indian film music a hand - headed critical objectivity and made several observations which were sharply at variance with the currently fashionable attitude of the

intellectuals that 'all Indian film music is bad'. The main stay of the Indian film is its music. He wrote 'The Indian film is the indegenous equivalent of the opera, or more truly, the musical and the pantomine (Cinema Vision India: 1980:33).

Between the years 1930 and 1940, there was much advance in the techniques of film production. The silent film became a talking film. This change forced the Indian motion picture to take a few steps back before it could leap ahead. It moved backwards to acquire sustenance and support from the Indian Commercial State or the Parsi Theatre, as it was called. The Theatre had achieved a measure of success with its song based on light classical and folk music. Along with the orchestra, the stage has nurtured theatrical songs which provided a spring board to the early Hindustani talkies, bent on having some hit-songs to their credit. Melodramas, comic interludes, multiple plot construction and high strong dialogue were also introduced into the talking film (Narendra Sharma, 57).

Bengal and Maharashtra led the way, producing pictures of high quality. New Theatres in Calcutta and Prabhat in Poona, each established a distinctive style in music through it films. The names of music composers like R.C. Boral, Timir Barar, Anupam Ghatak of Bengal and Master Krishnarao, Keshavrao Bhole, Dada Chandekar, Sudhir Phadke of Maharashtra are associated with the chaste, classical based music which they scored for many a successful film. The songs of actor - Singers K.L. Saigal, Pahari Sanyal, K.C. Dey, Kananbala, Shanta Apte, Shanta Hublikar, Shahmu Modale, Govindrao Tembe, Vishnupant Pagnis left a lingering flavour, which still has it own appeal (Cinema vision India: 1980:46).

In the first few years of the talkies, producers paid more attention to the production of pictures in regional languages like Bengali, Marathi, Telugu and Malayalam and Hindu films were made on experimental basis. As the interprovincial market for film expanded, film producers found it more profitable to

make pictures in Hindi and ensure their all India appeal. New Theatres of Calcutta raised the level of film music to new heights. Music director Boral and singers like K.C. Dey, Pankaj Mullick, Pahari Sanyal and above all K.L. Saigal not only popularised a film song but endowed it with respectability. Aarzoo Lucknavi, a master poet in his own right served as a lyricist ever willing to cooperate with the music director in a manner only a nature peotic soul could. Pradeep, the young poet, who joined Bombay Talkies in the last part of the first decade of the Hindustani Talkies, gave to the film song a message of young India, aspiring for freedom from foreign domination and for national self respect (Narendra Sharma, 57).

Bombay soon became known as the Hollywood of India and several film companies appeared, the better known among them being Bombay Talkies, Filmistan, Prakash, Ranjit, Sagar, Minerva. But then came the world war and the quit India movement and the Bengal famine. the ethos of India was changing. Communical passions ran high as the world war ended. British rule were at last preparing to quit India of their own accord Indian cinema became either frankly amoral or unashamedly escapist. °Kismet' was amoral, and °Basant' an escapist film. As all escapist Indian film, music and songs are the important ingredients to ensure box-office-returns. This led to a sudden demand for new voices, for music makers and musicians. This was the time when Devika Rani, Ashok Kumar, Arun Kumar, Pandit Pradeep, Motilal Ishwarlal, Kantilal, the comedian Charlie, Leela Chitnis, Sneha Prabha, Sitaradevi, Naseembanu, Sheela, Savitadevi, Maya Banerji became popular on discs (Cinema Vision India: 1980:47).

In an article entitle °The Sound of Magic - A Survey of the singing voice in Hindi films by Raghunath Seth in Cinema Vision India (Vol 1 No: 4: 1980: 51) it is stated that songs came into Hindi films with the first talkie Alam Ara in 1931 and have remained an essential part of the appeal of the popular cinema. At first the performers themselves were required to sing their own songs which were recorded simultaneously and later the art of playback singing developed which allowed for greater sophistication, as not every actor

can sing nor every good singer act. The technical quality of the recording became very sensitive and that led to a change in the style of singing. Songs in a popular media like cinema mean that the stress is on words and the emotional effect of a tune which can best express these words. With the correct blend of tune and lyrics the appeal of the song becomes even greater. This is the exact opposite of Hindustani classical music where musical skill, training and style dominate.

The women who sang for the early films came from the class of professional entertainers or singing girls who performed at private Soirees or Mehfils and at auspicious occasions like marriage or childbirth. The better aspects of this style have become recognised as semi-classical Hindustani music. But in the early days the main purpose of Mehfil singing was its erotic content and the words were often cheaply sentimental and style of singing loudly persistent and suggestive. The association of the feudal atmosphere of a Kotha still survives with this style of singing listening to the early film songs of the thirties one is struck at the theatricality and volume or the mehfil like quality of the singing.

The above mentioned style of the singing is considered the first phase of film singing. Among the singers of this era are Bibbo, Kajjan, Amirbai, Munribai, Khurshid, Gulab, Zohra, and Begum Akhtar and M.S. Subbalakshmi who acted as well as sang their own songs. Begum Akhtar and Subbalakshmi later concentrated on classical music concerts and recordings (Cinema India Vision: 1980: 52).

Amongst the men who sang was W.M. Khan who sang in only one film Alam Ara and Master Nissar both from the stage. All the female singers who came from the professional performer background and husky voices ranging one octave on the harmonium scale from Kali panch. They had the tendency to sing nasally and pronounce the Lyrics in a delibrate and mannered style.

Some typical songs of the period were sung by Zohrabai in Ratan, Amirbai in Sindoor, Khurshid in Pardesi and Begum Akhtar in Roti. It was not long

before film singing started to develop a style more suited to the medium (from the Mehfil type of song towards a less husky and more soothing style suited to the microphone). Examples are Kananbala singing Duniya ye duniya toofan main in the film Jawab, Umadevi's songs for Basant and Snehprabha Pradhan singing Nacho nacho pyare man ke mor in Punasmilan (Cinema Vision India" 1980: 53).

The second stage of film singing saw the emergence of a group of singers who had adjusted to the art of singing for the microphone and who kept their voices at a more natural pitch. They included Shamshad Begum, Suraiya and Noor Jehan and Kundan Lal Saigal. They were all however performing singer who appeared on the screen and sang their own songs.

The one voice of that era which was popular was Saigal. He, according to Raghunath Seth was perhaps the first crooner, a star performer capable of rousing hysterical adulation (Cinema Vision India : 1980: 53). He was also the first popular singer to give correct weightage and stress to the lyrics and his rendering of even classical Urdu ghazals.

With Saigal ended the second phase of film singing. By the late 40's the art of singing before the microphone had developed a total style and the recording instruments had also became more sophisticated. More voices came to films especially male voices eg. Mohammad Rafi, Mukesh, Hemant Kumar, Manna Dey, Kishore Kumar, Talat Mahmood. With the exception of Kishore who was also a performer, the others were primarily background singers lending their voices to actors who mouthed the words. With Mohammad Rafi, listeners were entranced to learn that there existed a voice capable of singing in three octaves without the loss of swara, mand, madhya or taar.

To explain song dominance in the Indian film, it is not enough to show the origins of the intensive use of songs. The real causes are to be detected in the nature of the filmic content itself. In this respect according to Ashok Ranade in his article 'The extraordinary importance of the Indian film song' in Cinema Vision India, Oct 1980, Vol. 1 No. 4. One

should remember that till the late thirties it was mythology which provided the chief source for filmic content in India, in both the film producing centres, Bombay and Calcutta.

As pointed by Barnouw and Krishnaswamy (1980:6) the first five years of talkie turned out no less than three Tukarams and Five Harishchanders. It can be stated as anthropological truth that in all cultures music is invariably employed to establish links with the supernatural.

Secondly, it is obvious that due to the very nature of the medium, films aimed at an all India audience. Phalke - the father of Indian Cinema - used to have explanatory titles in Hindi and English for his silents, as far as back as 1913 (Cinema Vision India : 1980:64). Music and Mythology are known as expressive agents with an in built cultural appeal which is also extra-regional. Hence they became the chief components in Indian films.

To understand the songs in the Indian film one should also be aware of the subtle distinction between °song' as it is understood today and songs of the earlier films.

In reality, all the compositions of these films can hardly be called °songs° in the true sense of the term. Often they were merely verses set to tunes. For instance, the film Indra sabha is reported to have been structured as a verse-play. They were verses in the sense that they were deviations from prose or narration - tone and hence they were less positively inclined towards musical quality which is after all the hallmark of a song.

The rationale behind this phenomenon must be clearly understood. Ashok Ranade stated that in Indian cultures that permeated with oral tradition, it was common procedure to move away from prose-tone repeatedly and unobtrusively, then fall into metrical strides but still to keep away from a full scale song - structure and again to return to the prose-tone. The

constants deviations from the prose-tone are to avoid monotony, and the non-use of the song proper is to ensure that the content is not obscured (Ashok: 1980:7).

Indian film music followed the same strategy with a slight change while taking the second step. Instead of dry metricality it opted for simple but perceivable rhythm equally simple but clearly felt tunes. In this way even though it did not become a song proper, the composition was a little more musical than metrical recitation.

The very important principle operative in any oral tradition is to treat the voice-speech-verse song music categories as degrees on the same continuum of content projection. This is the reason why there is a continuous back and forth movement between prose and intoned verse in the earlier Indian film music. The easiest parallel, added Ashok, is to be found in the Keertan in Maharashtra. It is pity that this verse in tune phase of Indian film music is often confused with the present 'plot and song' dichotomy in films.

To Ashok the early examples of the Indian film music are musically so unexciting:

'They had no aesthetic functions to discharge. The underlying compulsions were compulsions of communication which, though fundamental, are not aesthetic. One need not be on the defensive in this respect, because in denying their aestheticness we are not rejecting their excellence'.

(Cinema Vision India: 1980:8)

Dhoop Chaon was to be the first Indian film to have background music. The very idea of background music presupposes a conscious, methodical splitting of the unit of experience into the components to make them amenable to manipulatious of the art-intent. Aesthe ticizing aims at fusion preceded by a fussion of creative forces. A similar cool and aesthetic act was

or performed later, to make emergence and entrenchment of playback singing an indivisible feature of Indian film music (Cinema Vision India: 1983).

It is rightly maintained that next to °star's, composers of music - or music directors as they are popularly called - enjoy star status in the Indian film world. This confirms that film music has a tremendous hold over the film - viewing or the music exposed sections of the society taken as a whole:

1) In its relience on °song', Indian film was exploiting the readymade receptivity of the °audience' created and conditioned by the regional theatres which had newly emerged in the 19th century. The presentations of these theatres were replaced with songs. Thus films were following the strategy of imitating the successful in order to succeed.

2) For all purposes, Indian film was a continuation of the tradition popularised and perfected by the musical folk dramas of various regions (for example, Tamasha, Jatra, Keertan etc.). These folk dramas in turn, were carriers of the heritage so thoroughly systematised in ancient Sanskrit drama turgy.

The advent of the mass media (e.g. stage Song disc from 1921, cheaper Japanese Phonograph Machines from 1928, broadcasting from 1931) considerably accelerated the process and severing the internal bindings of film music and enabled it to become a free agent in popular music.

Indian film music has started reaping all the advantages of being a success formulation in circulation Indian film music is mass produced, quick to act, easily available and almost the same everywhere. It is no doubt music of greater abandon, more tonal colour, variety and polish but it has also become transient, rootless and artificial.

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